

Advanced Methods of Interpretation

Lecture VIII

Narratives, Interviews, Discourse

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What is a Discourse?

- Saussure's structuralism: langue vs. parole
- In contrast to classical linguistic structuralism, discourse theory treats also "parole", the act of speaking or "discourse", as a social fact
- For discourse theorists, the individual use of language (and thinking) is shaped by social and cultural forces
- Thus, discourses can be investigated as structured systems opposed to individual variations of speaking



Language, Discourse, Text

- Linguistic turn (Wittgenstein, Rorty): Language is not just referential, but constitutive for (social) reality
- Discourse between surface and deep structure:
 1. Discourses as products (structured structures): indicators of subjective and cultural meanings
 2. Discourses as autonomous (structuring structures): not produced by subjects, but themselves producer of subjectivities (Foucault, Willig)



Varieties of Discourse

- Discourse as act of speaking (Saussure, Ricoeur)
- Discourse as centered social interaction (Habermas)
- Discourse as non-centered societal communication (Foucault, Luhmann)
- Discourse as public speech and performance (Alexander, Habermas)
- Discourse as ensemble of written texts (Foucault)
- Discourse as cultural structure (e.g. cognition, codes, style, schemas)



Ricoeur: The Model of the Text I

- Hermeneutics as interpretation of texts
- Language as a system vs. language as discourse
- Text is written discourse (distanciation)

<i>Aspects</i>	Spoken Discourse	Written Discourse
<i>Existence</i>	temporal event	fixation of meaning
<i>Understanding</i>	of the speaker	author vs. text
<i>Reference</i>	situation	world
<i>Other</i>	dialogue	author vs. reader



Ricoeur: The Model of the Text II

- Subjective vs. objective meaning
- Texts are sequential, but they are also a totality (e.g. narrative organization of a text)
- Structural analysis and hermeneutics: surface-
semantics vs. depth-semantics
- “the search for correlations within and between social phenomena treated as semiotic entities would lose important and interest if it would not yield something like a depth-semantics” (p.115)



Narrative – Interpretative Approaches

- Structuralist interpretation of myth (Levi-Strauss): strictly synchronic and a-temporal, binary oppositions
- Morphological interpretation of folklore and fairy tales (Propp): diachronic and sequential analysis, characters and actions as narrative functions
- Structural-semiotic interpretation of narratives, particularly in popular culture (Barthes, Eco): combines synchronic and diachronic approaches
- Literary criticism and theory (Aristotle, Frye)
- Documentary method (Mannheim, Bohnsack, Nohl)



Aristotle on Narrative and Drama

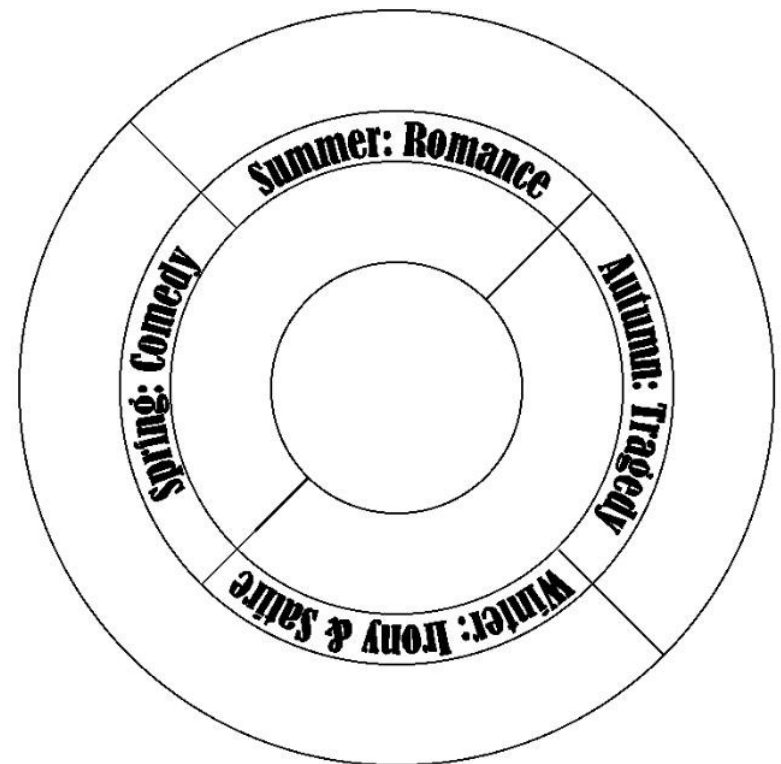
- *Sequentiality and closure*: Every story or dramatic plot (“mythos”) has a beginning, a middle and an end, provides a connection between two events
- *Mimesis*: Every story is an imitation of life and action, even if it is purely fictional
- *Comedy*: narrative representation of characters weaker and morally inferior than in real life
- *Tragedy*: narrative representation of characters stronger and morally superior than in real life
- *Catharsis*: emotional identification and purification



Frye: Narrative Genres

Frye: *Anatomy of Criticism*

- Low mimesis (little agency, collective logic)
- High mimesis (focus on individual agency)
- Ascending vs. descending
- White: *Metahistory* (1973),
Smith: *Why War?* (2005)



Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. [...] And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things [...] they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language.

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*



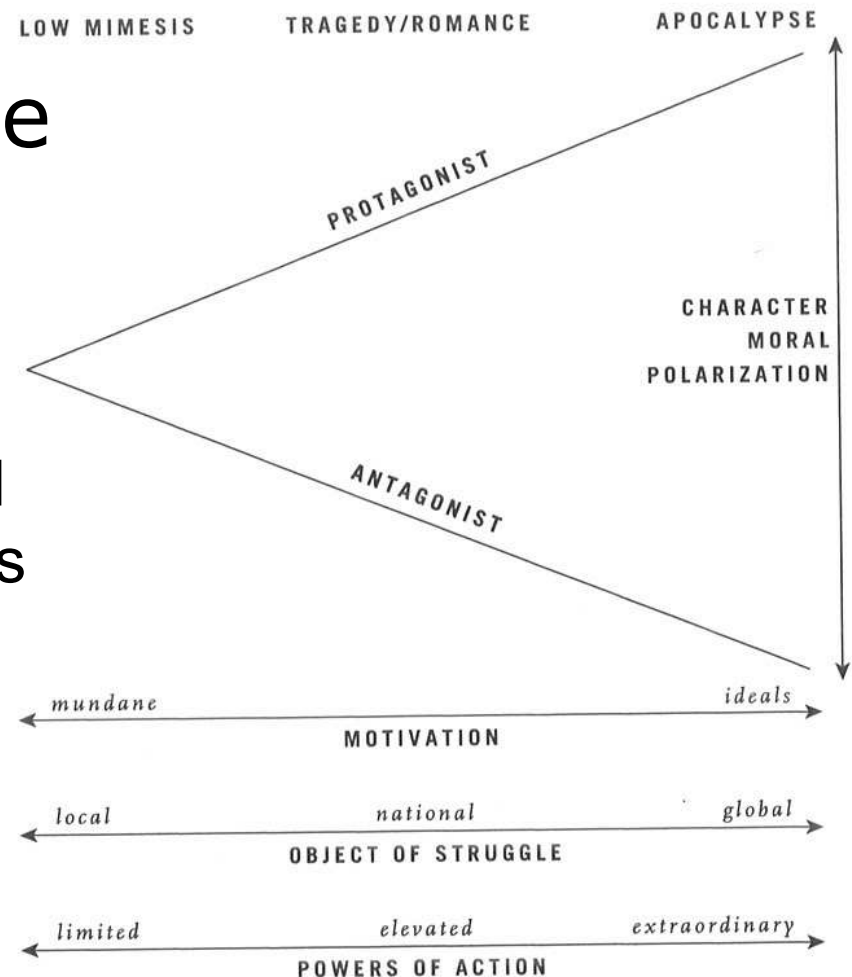
Narrative and History

- History as narrative template for the present (American and French revolution)
- Hayden White: *Metahistory* (1973) → Historiography uses narrative genres to write history
- The same historical events can be narrated in different ways and thus acquire different meanings
- Jeffrey Alexander (2002): Collective memory of World War II and Holocaust → from romance to tragedy
- *Metasociology*: Sociological explanation of social processes and action as narration (and genre)



Smith: Apocalypse

- Apocalypse as extreme high mimesis genre
- In modern democracies war can only be justified by apocalyptic narratives
- Possibility of *genre inflation* or *deflation*



Smith 2005: 24



Liminality and Narrative

- Victor Turner (1969): *The Ritual Process* as liminal phenomenon, as structure and antistructure
- The threshold or border between two structures (e.g. biographical stages) is characterized by antistructure
- Rituals can be used to cross the threshold between two structures and can have transformative effects
- Separation, liminal phase, reincorporation
- Narrative as a structured process and antistructural phenomenon with transformative effects



Sequentiality and Narrative

- The threefold distinction found in Aristotle's work on the drama, Turner's study of the ritual and Campbell's theory of the monomyth is the most basic sequence
- However, sequentiality and liminality are fractal, narrative elements can be decomposed further

Aristotle - Plot	Turner – Ritual	Campbell - Monomyth
Beginning	Separation	Departure
Middle	Liminal phase	Initiation
End	Reincorporation	Return

Turner: Liminality and Culture

As a matter of fact, in the liminal phases of ritual, one often finds a simplification, even elimination, of social structure in the British sense and an amplification of structure in Lévi-Strauss's sense. We find social relationships simplified, while myth and ritual are elaborated. That this is so is really quite simple to understand: if liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs.

Turner (1980: 167)



Biography and Liminality

Transition between institutional structures:

- Institutional thresholds: Problematic vs. automatic transition. Is there a conscious choice involved?

Life crisis:

- Detached from institutional thresholds; biographical contingency; crisis vs. normality

Settled vs. unsettled lives (Swidler 1986, 2005):

- Culture as toolkit and ideology (love and marriage)



Autobiographic/Narrative Identities

1. The identity of the character in the narrative (on the level of narrated actions)
2. The identity of the character in the narrative constructed by the narrator (reflexive level)
3. The identity of the narrator (unintended style of self-representation)
4. The identity constructed by the of the narrator (reflexive, intended style of self-representation)



Schütze: Narrative Interviews

- Interest in process structures of life course
- Biographical narratives as “mediators between the objectivity and subjectivity of life stories” (p.196)
- Interviewer has to encourage narratives actively
- Distinction between the narrative-descriptive and the argumentative-evaluative level of discourse

Narrative obligations (“Zugzwänge des Erzählens”):

- Reduces the danger of misrepresentation
- Forces the interviewee to complete the narrative form



Schütze: Formal Aspects of Biographies

Schütze	Active	Passive
Outer World	Biographical action schemes (1)	Institutional sequence patterns (2)
Inner World	Transformation (4)	Trajectories of suffering (3)



Nohl – Documentary Method

	Topical Surface	Deep Meaning Structure
Questions	What?	How?
Reconstruction of..	Explicit content	Orientation framework
Mannheim (early 20s)	Objective and subjective meaning	Documentary meaning
Mannheim (late 20s)	Communicative knowledge	Conjunctive experience
Method	Formulating interpretation	Reflecting interpretation

Narrative Interview and Deep Meaning Structure

The Documentary Method shares with the narrative interview the conviction that what is communicated verbally and explicitly in interview texts is not the only element of significance to the empirical analysis, but that it is above all necessary to reconstruct the meaning that underlies and is implied with these utterances. [...]

The Documentary Method distinguishes between these two levels of meaning by referring to the first level as that of the “intentional expressive meaning” and “objective meaning” and to the latter as that of the “documentary meaning”.

Nohl (2010: 200f.)



Two Types of Interpretation

Formulating interpretation (topical structures):

- Research topics
- Passages of remarkable detail and passion (“focusing metaphors”)
- Topics that emerge by comparison

Reflecting interpretation (orientation frameworks):

- How topics are dealt with
- Homologous framework of the case
- Orientation frameworks become visible in comparisons



Steps of Analysis

- Sequential analysis: Orientation frames limit the possible continuations for a sequence (confirmation)
- Comparative analysis: elaborating orientation frameworks by contrasting them

Type formation:

- Ideal types, sensegenetic explanation (analytic autonomy of culture)
- Sociogenetic explanation: how meaning structures relate to structural variables and typical experiences (concrete autonomy of culture)

Concrete Autonomy of Culture

Documentary interpretation (through case reconstructions) thus not only allows for the individuality of experiential connections, may these refer to the entire biography or to individual sections of it (e.g. to profession). As those aspects of these experiential connections that are typical of age, social gender, academic qualifications or other collective experience dimensions are identified, the Documentary Method also permits the identification of the collective aspects of the biographies. In the biographies, individuality and collectivity are therefore not mutually exclusive but are closely linked with each other.

Nohl (2010: 215)



Thank you for your
attention, criticism and
further suggestions!

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